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ABSTRACT

This document reviews "A Place Called School," by John I. Goodlad, and "High School. A Report on Secondary Education in America," by Ernest L. Boyer. The reviewer acknowledges that both are well written and their conclusions ring true, but he finds that their recommendations may not be far reaching enough. Boxer is critized for basing his recommendations and conclusions almost entirely on this one study, appearing to have little specialized knowledge about teaching, not referring to the relevant research literature, and making only common-sense recommendations. Goodlad is found to be more scholarly in tone, listing more statistical data, and making more use of related research, but the reviewer regrets Goodlad's inability to transcend conventional wisdom in his recommendations for instructional improvement, and suggests that those recommendations do not go far enough in bringing about the "radical breakthrough" that is needed. Nevertheless, the reviewer has hopes that these books will produce the public awareness and support needed to bring about school improvement. (DCS)

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A PLACE CALLED SCHOOL and HIGH SCHOOL
A View of Two Recent Reports on Schools From the Perspective of Research on Teaching

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Let me preface what I will have to say about these two important reports by expressing my admiration, my awe, at the amount of data that each author has dealt with, and the complete and seemingly effortless command of all the details they both display. To be able to cope with such complexity at all is a remarkable feat; to be able to communicate the essence of what they have found to the lay reader in a way that is as clear and as pleasant to read as both of these books are is an even more impressive accomplishment.

Let me also state that I propose to address my comments mainly to those parts of the reports that deal with teachers and teacher education, because these are the parts of the content about which I am least ignorant. I will first comment on each report separately, and then offer some general observations.

High School. Boyer's book is the more readable of the two; indeed its rather fast-moving, smooth style makes it read almost like a novel, and the picture it presents of present-day high schools is filled with the same sort fascinating and convincing detail one expects in a novel. On the whole, Boyer finds the high school classroom rather a dull place to be, a place where too much time is spent on routine tasks and low-level learning activities, and where students are rarely challenged. The life of the typical high school teacher is described in grim terms:

> A typical high school teacher must manage twenty-five to forty students each class period. He or she must maintain control, teach a prescribed course of study, engage the students, pay attention to student differences, and determine through tests and questioning how well students have learned the material presented.[142]

This leaves very little time or inducement to plan ways

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of challenging students; and it is difficult for a teacher to maintain a high level of performance with school standards as low as they often are, with so many unmotivated students and non-supporting parents, and with the feeling of powerlessness that results from having little or no control over the curriculum, the class schedule, the goals and the rules under which the school operates; or, in some cases even the textbooks and tests used. One result of all this is that some teachers have given up trying and "entered into an unwritten, unspoken corrupting contract that promises a light work load in exchange for cooperation in the classroom."[144]

My principal quarrel with Boyer is that he seems unaware of the growing body of specialized knowledge of teaching that contains the ultimate solution to the very problem with which he is concerned. By his own account, he sees little that is mysterious about successful teaching; good teaching is to him "a matter of common sense," of such simple tasks as defining goals, planning carefully, of clarity, pacing and timing, love of one's subject and respect for students, and so on; and "some old-fashioned yet enduring qualities in human relationships that still work--command of the material to be aught, contagious enthusiasm for the work to be done, optimism about the potential of the students, . . .and human sensitivity, that is, integrity and warmth as a human being."[149]

The stratagems Boyer proposes for improving the quality of teaching reflect this simplistic point of view. Many take the form of incentives to teachers to perform better, and include paying them better salaries, giving more recognition and rewards to outstanding teachers, allowance for travel to professional meeting, and a career ladder for teachers. Others include such things as paid professional development institutes for practicing teachers and a "National Teacher Service" to lure more college students into the profession.

The recommendations for changes in preservice training include an emphasis on completing an academic major in the subject to be taught and on classroom observation during the junior and senior year, a mandatory fifth year of "instructional and apprenticeship experience" including four "professional courses": schooling in America, learning theory and research, the teaching of writing, and the use of technology, No instruction in teaching anything except writing other than the apprenticeship mentioned.

There is no clue anywhere as to how a teacher's performance is to be changed for the better, or what additional competencies they are to acquire that will make them more effective, except through the fifth year apprenticeship. Given the problems the report describes, having new teachers learn from old ones does not seem a very promising solution.

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A Place Called School. Goodlad's style is more scholarly in tone, and therefore moves more slowly, than Boyer's; and it contains quite a bit more meat. He pauses more often to compare his findings with those of other researchers, he presents more statistical data than Boyer does anywhere outside his first chapter, and his treatment of the topic is more sophisticated, suggests a much broader acquaintance with the vast body of related research. Goodlad avoids making sweeping recommendations, emphasizing instead that schools tend to be very different from one another and need to change in different ways. Although he does present a comprehensive set of suggested goals, academic, vocational, social-civic-cultural, and personal, he insists that priorities among them should be determined locally.

Goodlad sees the teacher as as prevented from realizing the great effect he could have on student learning by a number of restrictive conditions which can and should be corrected. Some of them operates to exclude some with the greatest potential.

> Talk of securing and maintaining a stable corps of outstanding teachers is empty rhetoric unless serious efforts are made to study and remedy the conditions likely to drive out those already recruited.[173]

> The practicing teacher . . . functions in a context where the beliefs and expectations are those of a profession but where the realities tend to constrain, likening actual practice more to a trade. . . . By its very nature a profession involves both considerable autonomy in decision making and knowledge and skills developed before entry and then honed in practice.[193-194]

Unlike Boyer, Goodlad clearly sees that improvement in instruction requires that we transcend the conventional wisdom that freezes the current practice of teaching and frustrates attempts to bring about the "radical breakthrough' that is needed. Small changes will not have any appreciable impact on so large and complex a set of problems as we face. As long as teachers continue to teach in the ways they were taught no real improvement is possible. And another idea that must go is the idea that each teacher should teach as he sees fit.

Among the specific suggestions Goodlad offers is the creation of a position of "head teacher" to be filled by a classroom teacher who is outstanding in knowledge of research on teaching as well as skilled in applying it in the classroom. This person instead of an administrator would take over the position instructional leader in the school. Another is that "future

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teachers. . .be effectively separated from most of the conventional ways of teaching."[314] Colleges and school systems should work together to identify or set up "key" or demonstration schools to which student teachers will be assigned and in which they will spend time as junior members of the faculty before they become full-fledged practicing teachers. In this way they can learn new ways of teaching before they are exposed to those that reflect the conventional wisdom of the profession.

General Comments. Most of what both books have to say about the problems teachers face today rings true, a fact which tempts me to make an error to which educators seem particularly susceptible. I am referring here to a widespread tendency to judge the soundness of an educational research report by the conclusions it reaches rather than by how those conclusions were reached.

This tendency is a major obstacle, perhaps the major obstacle, to the orderly growth of knowledge about education that exists. It is a very natural thing for a layperson to judge new information on the basis of how well it fits into what is already known. The test of common sense, as it is called, may serve us well enough in some cases, but it fails us when we need it most. It fails whenever some discovery comes along that is really new.

It was a friend who is an eminent physicist who first made me realize the rather obvious fact that every important scientific discovery ever made failed this test because it contradicted the common sense of its day. This was true way back when Galileo almost lost his tenure (of life) by saying that the earth rotates around the sun. It was true when Einstein proposed his relativity theories. And it is certainly true about what they are saying nowadays about the unifying force. What could possibly be more obvious than the fact that no conclusion that agrees with what we already know can possibly tell us anything new?

But most educators seem to hold their beliefs and opinions about teaching and learning so dear that they have great difficulty in accepting any new discovery that contradicts any part of these beliefs. This creates a strong conservatism and resistance to change in our profession that rather reminds me of the conservatism of the medieval church that Galileo had to face.

Perhaps the most important thing that the scientific method has done for us is to provide us with some practical ways of telling whether or not we should believe something that appears utterly incredible. It has been wisely said that the real purpose of research is to help us find out which of the things we know are true and which are not.

One thing that bothers me about both of these reports,

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most especially Goodlad's, is that so many of their findings are so plausible, that so many of them agree so well with what we already believe. This strongly suggests to me that these studies must not be telling us anything really new or important; that they must be superficial at best, and cannot add much to our deeper understanding of what is really wrong with the schools. It seems to me that they verify the symptoms but tell us little or nothing about the disease that points to a remedy.

I may be talking about the kind of solution that depends on what Goodlad called a "grand design," when all he set out do develop was what he calls a "short-term agenda," a plan to relieve some painful symptoms rather than to effect a permanent cure. If neither study was really meant to do any more than that, both must be considered to have succeeded reasonably well.

If so, I would say that Boyer did this in much the same way that it might have been done by a lay observer who had the time to spend, and that his recommendations are for the most part based on common sense. This is largely responsible for the readability of the report and the great appeal of most of his recommendations, as well as for the discontent with them I have expressed.

I would say that Goodlad has tried to go beyond common sense by drawing upon other research than that done as part of the study he is reporting. By collating his observations with those of others who have tried to solve some of these problems in the past he has succeeded in doing so.

The major difference between these two studies lies right here in the broadness of the data bases upon which the authors draw. Boyer seems to base his conclusions and recommendations almost entirely on the data of this one study. Goodlad, on the other hand, clearly draws on a data base much broader than that provided by the data of the one study he is reporting. The risks involved in taking action on the basis of the results of a single study are well known to researchers; hence the emphasis scientists place on replication and verification of results.

This is particularly important since both of these reports are clearly designed to provide information to guide decision makers in their efforts to change the schools for the better. Both are addressed, then, to an audience made up primarily of informed and intelligent laypersons who are likely to be strongly influenced by what they read in either report. Such an audience is neither as likely to have access to the relevant research literature, nor to be as aware of the risks involved in disregarding it,as other researchers would be.

In such circumstances it seems to me to be the responsibility of the author of a such a report somehow to make

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this information available to his readers, along with his own findings. Goodlad does this; but Boyer does not. A report addressed to the lay public which neglects this responsibility functions more like a piece of propaganda than a research study since it presents only one side of a problem.

From a researcher's point of view it seems clear that the substantial resources invested in studies like these might better have been spent on research more likely to discover something about the maladies that afflict our schools than on research which can only reaffirm what we already know. It may be that policy concerns made the investment in the propaganda effort the better one in this case Perhaps it is more important to secure the kind off public awareness such a book produces as a means of generating the public support we need before we can do anything to improve the schools.

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